



Working with the Bulgarians

Bulgaria is a small and picturesque country that has existed for more than 13 centuries and has a population of 8 million. It links the East and West and is situated on the Black Sea, occupying the northeastern part of the Balkan Peninsula, sharing its borders with Serbia, Macedonia, Romania, Greece and Turkey.

The main religion in Bulgaria is Bulgarian Orthodox. There are also Roman Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, Jews etc. Around twelve percent of the people are Muslim.

Sofia is home to most of the foreign companies and expatriates. It is the administrative, industrial, transport, cultural and University centre of the country. Sofia is home to almost 20% of the Bulgarian population, and the city has about 15% of industries within her city limits.

Bulgaria offers foreign investors some of the world's most competitive business costs. Real estate investment has produced a plentiful supply of modern offices at very competitive costs. Corporate taxes and labour prices are quite low by European standards. Privatisation and deregulation are creating sophisticated public utility and telecommunications industries. After 20 years of democracy Bulgaria is in a stable political environment and low country risk, and has been a NATO member since 2004 and EU member since 2007.

English is the second language of a younger and professional generation, while French and German are more current among older people. Russian can be useful. Bulgarians use the Cyrillic Alphabet, also known as Azbuka, derived from the old names of the first two letters of most variant Cyrillic alphabets. Since the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union, Cyrillic became the third official alphabet of the European Union, following the Latin and Greek alphabets.

Bulgarians are extremely proud of their rich cultural heritage. Though Bulgaria strives to create a more modern society, Bulgarians place a high importance on tradition and their cultural heritage. This is evident in everyday life in the form of festivities and traditional holidays and in the formality of business culture.

Family is an integral part of Bulgarian culture, which strongly influences how people behave, and live their daily lives. Loyalty and commitment to family members is essential. An extremely high importance is placed on relationships in general. Hospitality and socialising are vital to establish the necessary relationships of cooperation and trust and to set up the informal communication channels through which people get things done. Indeed, decisions are often taken outside the office in an informal environment.

The Bulgarian workforce is highly educated. A big challenge for foreign companies and expatriates is to manage the local staff. There is an eagerness especially by Bulgarian professionals, to learn, pick up and benefit from foreign expertise, management styles and know-how now available to them.

People look for strong leadership and the assertion of authority from bosses, who maintain a separate status from their subordinates. Management styles are highly personalised. Information flows, decision-making and reporting are vertically oriented and centred at the top of the organisation. People are reluctant to commit themselves and take responsibility unless they are very sure of their facts.

Meetings tend to be formal and follow a strict routine of introductions, handshakes and an exchange of business cards. Often they will go past the allocated time, so schedule extra time between meetings. Meetings are not a forum for analysis, debate or decision-making. They are more to reconcile the personalities involved in an issue than to resolve it. The systematic conduct of meetings with agendas, minutes and action plans are found in more westernized companies.

Punctuality is valued. Always apologise and give an explanation if late to an appointment or meeting

Don't underestimate the directness of Bulgarians. Despite their reserved reputation, communication in business situations is more direct and succinct. Don't be afraid to use humour to 'break the ice' but be careful not to direct it at anyone in particular.